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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000629

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: PARLIAMENTARY LEADER VIEWS DIALOGUE
EFFORT WITH OPTIMISM

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Veteran Maronite MP Robert Ghanem expressed guarded optimism on both the process and possible outcome of this week's "national dialogue" conference organized by Speaker Nabih Berri. Ghanem admitted he was somewhat surprised that Berri had been able to bring together the disparate power brokers, but said this indicates the reluctance of all parties to allow the issue of the presidency to degenerate into a constitutional crisis on or about March 14. In his opinion, the meeting's most volatile confrontation will take place between Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Hizballah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. If these political

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opposites can reach an agreement on the status of Lahoud and his possible successor, Ghanem feels that even Michel Aoun would have to go along with a consensus decision. The other items on the ambitious agenda -- UNSCR 1559, the Hariri assassination, and Syrian-Lebanese relations -- do not require full resolution for the conference to be considered a success. In Ghanem's view, if the issue of the presidency can be resolved, the ability to discuss and begin the consensus process on the remaining issues would be sufficient. Regarding the soon-to-be-released draft Electoral Law, he indicated its core achievements, if approved, would be the introduction of proportional representation and the establishment of equitable electoral districts. End summary.

¶2. (U) Maronite MP Robert Ghanem, chairman of Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, met with poloff on February 28 in Beirut. MP Ghanem's committee controls which proposed legislation will be considered by the deliberative body, prior to final determination by Speaker Nabih Berri. The veteran politician, who ran for office on the list of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, represents a heterogeneous district in the western Biqa Valley and is sometimes mentioned as a dark-horse presidential candidate.

¶3. (C) With the impending opening session of Nabih Berri's "national dialogue" conference two days off, MP Robert Ghanem expressed amazement that Berri was able to pull it off at all, particularly with its inclusive list of attendees: Aoun, Nasrallah, Hariri, Siniora, Jumblatt, Ja'ja', Amin Gemayel, Mohammad Safadi, Elie Skaff, Boutros Harb, and Berri. Ghanem said perhaps it was blind luck, perhaps it was planned, but the increased sectarian tension caused by Saad Hariri's call for the removal of Lahoud by March 14 (and the

threats of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations) had appeared to shake Lebanon's leaders from their political stupor of inaction. In his view, no one wants to go down the in which confrontation between aggrieved sectarian communities could spin out of control.

¶4. (C) Ghanem acknowledged that the conference agenda was ambitious and would likely not achieve resolution on all the planned topics, but he insisted that such an outcome was almost beside the point. For months, the major political players had launched accusations at each other from a distance, ratcheting up the pressure in a zero-sum game, which often defines Lebanese politics. He said that this volleying of charges and counter-charges, usually executed by statements issued through affiliated media outlets, never led to any discussion -- "...everyone was accusing, no one was listening."

TWO RESULTS ARE NEEDED

¶5. (C) Ghanem continued his observation that Berri's apparent success in corralling all the principal political figures in one room for ten days was likely to produce two results: some form of agreement regarding the status of Emile Lahoud, and at least a face-to-face exchange of positions on the other critical issues facing the country: Hizballah's militia, relations with Syria, the Hariri investigation, and political and economic reform. In Lebanon's unique consensual democracy, this exchange of ideas and positions was critical, and up to now, non-existent. From his discussions with his parliamentary colleagues, Ghanem was confident that an agreement on the presidency and the beginning of consensus-building dialogue on the other major issues would go a long way toward reducing communal tensions.

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¶6. (C) The Maronite politician conceded it would be difficult to achieve the two foregoing objectives, but he implied that a good deal of preparatory work within the principal political blocs had already taken place. He referred to the February 24 meeting of many of the Christian leaders (minus Aoun) at the residence of Amin Gemayel, where a common approach to the issue of the presidency was discussed. Concerning the Sunni, Shia and Druse communities, Ghanem said their monolithic structure made it easy for them to decide matters for their respective communities.

¶7. (C) From his perspective, Michel Aoun was the wild card. Aoun's near obsession with the presidency had seriously compromised his judgment and reason. Aoun's principal weapon up to this time had been his "above-the-fray" refusal to consider other presidential candidates. But in the "national dialogue" environment, continued Ghanem, the former general would be hard-pressed to be the odd man out, if the other participants could achieve consensus. He speculated that Aoun may actually be forced to support an agreement that doesn't feature Aoun.

¶8. (C) This scenario, he acknowledged, required that the participants be prepared to sacrifice some of their political territory and work at least partially for Lebanese interests, rather than strict confessional advantages. Ghanem admitted it was a tall order, but the recent Baabda-Aley accord and the agreement to convene this meeting were auspicious signs. He concluded, "After all, everyone realizes we can't go on in this manner, because everyone will lose."

DRAFT ELECTORAL LAW

¶9. (C) As chairman of the Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, MP Ghanem was aware that the bi-partisan Electoral Commission was set to release its draft to the Siniora cabinet, which in turn would approve the document for

debate in Parliament. He indicated that three options would be offered in the draft, differing primarily in the number of electoral districts, specifically 9, 13, or 14 districts across the country. Although the draft law did not mandate proportional representation, Ghanem said he hoped that important electoral concept would survive to the final document because, in his opinion, it was the key to the eventual emergence of pluralistic political parties and a break from the old "political boss" system of politics. He sardonically commented that the most difficult law to pass was an equitable electoral law, because parliamentarians were legislating their own professional existence.

FELTMAN